

**Dear Senators and Representatives,**

I am writing to request your support for bill *"An Act to Include Certain Mental Health Workers in the 1998 Special Plan."* I have worked as a Registered Nurse at Riverview Psychiatric Center (RPC) for 12 years. At 60 years old, I remain deeply committed to caring for the individuals we serve. Over the years, I've witnessed and been directly involved in traumatic incidents that have left lasting emotional scars, many of which I would rather forget.

Last year I watched the recorded testimonies from my colleagues who spoke on this (or related) bill. I was deeply moved by their accounts and found myself emotionally overwhelmed, sobbing as traumatic memories resurfaced. One of my colleagues, who has worked at RPC for 34 years, wrote a brief testimony for that event and suffered from PTSD for weeks—possibly months—due to the emotional toll of writing her statement. Neither of us is eligible for retirement yet, and the weight of this situation is something we feel every single day.

From my research, it's clear that healthcare professionals in Maine, particularly those working in mental health, experience disproportionately high rates of injury from assaults compared to Corrections Officers, for whom the 1998 Special Plan was created. My husband (who retired under the 1998 plan) and son, both of whom worked as Corrections Officers at the Maine State Prison, were in a more controlled environment than we are at RPC. We are exposed to far greater risks, and yet we're not afforded the same protections.

Staffing issues have been particularly problematic. In response to recent scrutiny, management hired a significant number of travel nurses and, for the first time, travel mental health workers. I can't say for certain; but it appears this group has made up a large portion of our direct care staff over the past year. While this might look good on paper, the reality is that these travelers are paid considerably more than regular staff, contribute less work, and require additional training and support from those of us on the floor. This creates an even greater burden for regular staff and exacerbates an already challenging role. I've read that "Healthcare workers experience the highest rate of workplace violence compared to most other professions." Additionally, a Maine study shows that employees in their first year are injured most often, which is clearly due to a lack of experience. Every time there's a violent patient incident, we face greater exposure to harm, particularly with the constant turnover and influx of short-term travel employees. When inexperienced staff make serious mistakes,

we all pay the price with injuries and trauma that could have been avoided had we been working with more experienced staff.

I hope you understand the gravity of the situation at RPC and the immense toll it takes on those of us who are dedicated to our work. We deserve to have the ability to retire before we have irreversible PTSD or disabling physical injuries.

Thank you again for your consideration in supporting "An Act to Include Certain Mental Health Workers in the 1998 Special Plan."

Sincerely,



Lasca Black, RN III



YOU PUNCH A COP... ARRESTED.

A BUS DRIVER... ARRESTED.

A BARTENDER... ARRESTED.

YOU PUNCH A NURSE...

WHAT COULD YOU HAVE DONE BETTER?

## OPINION

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# Staffing levels unsafe at state psychiatric facilities

Lawmakers can prevent future tragedies by helping us more easily recruit and retain qualified mental health staff.

When the Maine Legislature returns to work this week, Mainers who work with patients with severe mental illness are counting on lawmakers to address a dire staffing crisis in our field. For 23 years, I have worked directly with some of the most dangerous and severely mentally ill people in the state at Riverview Psychiatric Center in Augusta. If the Legislature does not do something to retain and recruit mental health workers at our facility, I fear we can neither physically nor mentally continue with business as usual.

Patients who come to Riverview have committed murders, rapes and other heinous crimes. Courts

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sally Nichols** of New Sharon is a mental health worker at Riverview Psychiatric Center and president of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 1825.

have deemed them at imminent risk of harm to themselves or others, incompetent to stand trial and not criminally responsible by reason of mental illness. As mental health workers, we don't judge our patients for their crimes and recognize that their sickness caused them to commit such violent acts. We approach our work with empathy and compassion: Riverview is medical facility, so the first thing we do when a patient comes into our hospital from prison or jail is remove their wrist restraints and shackles and welcome them with a cup of coffee.

We may not have advanced degrees, but we have been through what we call "Riverview College" and we have the training to effectively de-escalate patients when they have a psychotic break. We don't use restraints, pepper spray or tasers on patients when they act out violently. We use our words to talk them down, though sometimes we have to use our bodies.

Unfortunately, we are currently far below safe staffing levels with 53 vacancies this past weekend. At times, we have had just one mental health worker for 11 or 12 patients when we're supposed to have a one to six staffing ratio, according to the 1990 AMHI consent decree. When we don't have enough staff to redirect patients, it can be very dangerous. I carry my two front teeth in a container in my purse as a reminder of what can go wrong. I have been knocked out twice and carried out in an ambulance both times. My last assault

gave me permanent facial damage, a limited feeling in my right cheek and upper lip and a droopy eye. My co-worker didn't recognize me when she found me lying in a pool of blood.

In testimony before the Maine Legislature, my coworkers and I have told harrowing stories about violent attacks we have suffered and witnessed. We have been punched, choked, kicked, stabbed and sexually assaulted. A pregnant worker was stabbed multiple times and fortunately survived after two surgeries. One worker received such a deep wound on his head from a patient that his skull was exposed. A male colleague had every bone in his face broken and never returned to work. My colleagues have had multiple surgeries for dislocated shoulders, as well as hip replacements and rods and screws put in their ankles and legs due to injuries on the job.

One day I witnessed a pa-

tient stomp on the head and neck of a coworker a dozen times before he was finally redirected. She suffered a traumatic brain injury that caused her to have seizures and mini strokes after the incident. She couldn't work and had to fight for two years for workers' compensation. Without income, she began to lose hope. On August 30, 2022, her fight finally ended when she took her own life.

Such life-threatening challenges are not unique to Riverview; they also exist at Dorothea Dix Psychiatric Center in Bangor. The Legislature can prevent future tragedies by helping us recruit and retain qualified staff. Last year, state lawmakers gave bipartisan support for L.D. 1761, sponsored by Senate President Troy Jackson (D-Aroostook), which would allow mental health workers like my colleagues to receive state retirement benefits after 25 years of service. Now we just need

the Legislature's Appropriations Committee to fund it, the Legislature to enact and the governor to sign the bill.

This is the same special retirement plan that our law enforcement, firefighters and corrections officers receive in recognition of the risks they take every day to protect our communities. A number of my colleagues have left to seek work in corrections because they can receive this benefit. If we were also eligible for this special retirement plan, we could better recruit and retain qualified mental health workers. This bill would also allow my colleagues to retire from doing this dangerous and physically demanding work at a reasonable age.

I'm 75 years old, so this probably won't affect me, but I believe we owe it to my coworkers in recognition of the critical service they provide and the dangers they face every day.